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ABSTRACT

This summary assessment report evaluates the progress being made by the Virginia's 23 community colleges in two areas: the performance of remedial students and those students who transfer to four-year institutions. In addition, it discusses the performance of recent high school graduates who enroll in remedial courses. Each college submitted a report, which was peer reviewed by a group of experienced assessment practitioners and institutional researchers. The reviewers were asked to indicate whether the colleges were making satisfactory progress in these two areas. Twenty colleges were found to be making satisfactory progress on each topic, while three colleges either did not provide the requested information or the reports were unclear. Summary results for transfer assessment are presented in the following categories: (1) monitoring trends; (2) two-year and four-year institution collaboration; (3) curricular changes and skills development; (4) improving transfer services; and (5) minority student transfer. Remedial assessment results address the following categories: (1) success of remedial programs; (2) testing and placement; (3) changes to courses and instructional methods; (4) setting standards; (5) other solutions to improving performance; and (6) VCCS special topic. (VWC)

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ED 431 487

VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

SUMMARY

1996 ASSESSMENT REPORTS

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SUMMARY
1996 ASSESSMENT REPORTS

Introduction

In fall 1996, the Virginia community colleges submitted assessment reports on two topics: the performance of remedial students and those students who transfer to four-year institutions. A special topic the colleges were asked by the VCCS to address concerned the performance of recent high school graduates who enroll in remedial courses. As in past years, the colleges were asked to focus on the ways in which assessment results have been used to improve student learning, instruction, programs, and services. A description of the report evaluation process, and a summary of the improvements already made and proposed changes that will be evaluated in future years are provided below.

The Evaluation Process

The VCCS continued the use of the peer evaluation process for the 1996 report, convening a group of experienced assessment practitioners, institutional researchers, and a division chair on October 21 and 22 to evaluate each college's assessment report. Because assessment of transfer student performance was evaluated, two experienced assessment practitioners from four-year institutions were invited to participate in the discussions. They were very complimentary of community college work, noting in several cases that the data collection and analyses exceeded that of many of the four-year institutions. Their knowledge of transfer issues, good assessment practice, and research methods added perspective to the team discussions and created valuable exchanges with VCCS reviewers.

Reviewers were asked to indicate whether colleges were making satisfactory progress in assessing remedial and transfer students, and to prepare written observations, recommendations, and commendations for each report. The evaluation summaries showed that twenty colleges were making satisfactory progress on each topic. For two colleges, the evaluators were unclear after reading the reports whether the college was making satisfactory progress. Written observations and recommendations concerning improvements were provided to each college. One college did not submit a report that provided evidence of satisfactory progress in assessing either topic. The Chancellor contacted this president directly and discussed plans for improving the college's assessment program.

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TRANSFER ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Monitoring Trends

In monitoring the general performance of students who transfer, colleges continue to report that students who graduate from a community college earn higher grade point averages than those who do not graduate. Transfer shock may occur, but most colleges report that students recover after one semester and earn grades equivalent (sometimes higher) to those earned at the community college. As might be expected, the change in grade point average varies by transfer institution and major. On the other hand, some colleges report that transfers to some institutions maintain a grade point average equivalent to that earned at the community college. From the reports, it is clear that each community college is aware of the institutions and programs where students have transfer difficulties and they are actively implementing solutions to identified problems. Several colleges reported that they had established goals, standards, or "success factors" against which to evaluate the performance of transfer students. One college, for example, has established a goal of not having a drop in grade point average of greater than 0.5 for transfer students.

Looking systemwide, colleges report that 80% or more of community college students continue to be in good academic standing after transfer. Colleges monitor the number of credits and specific courses that are accepted by four-year institutions to ensure that the State Policy on Transfer is contributing to the success of transfer students. Also, colleges are aware that as four-year institutions restructure programs, they need to examine data to identify possible effects on community college transfer students. Some colleges have established articulation or transfer committees that review transfer data to identify problems, but also to monitor student performance to see whether the changes they have made appear to be solving certain problems.

Two-Year and Four-Year Institution Collaboration

As has been demonstrated by data analyses in the past, transfer is largely a regional phenomenon, and as might be expected, colleges give added attention to and study most closely the institutions to which a majority of their students transfer. For example, in the 1996 reports, colleges reported an increase in the number of articulation agreements with their regional four-year institutions. Some of the agreements were for Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs, a natural result of assessment data that have shown an increase in the number of transfer students in these programs.

In addition to developing articulation agreements, interaction between two-year and four-year faculty occurs in several other ways. One community college reported that its faculty attend an annual articulation conference sponsored by the Engineering faculty at a four-year university. During the conference, faculty discuss articulation, but they also have the opportunity to interact with former students and get, firsthand, student evaluations of how well they were prepared at the community college. Several colleges reported that they invite four-year college faculty to speak to classes about programs, but also about expectations for skill levels in areas such as writing. Some colleges also reported that their faculty are asked by the four-year institutions to serve on advisory committees and that they invite four-year faculty to serve on college transfer advisory committees.

Curricular Changes and Skills Development

Colleges frequently use data and information collected from assessing transfer students to review programs, make curricular changes, and to improve student skills and competence in certain disciplines. The most frequently cited disciplines where improvements were made were mathematics, science, engineering, computer science, and foreign language. To address specific problems, colleges changed course pre-requisites, emphasized topics such as probability in mathematics courses, added full-time faculty in areas such as computer science and foreign language, and added computer courses. One college restructured all transfer programs, decreasing the number of programs, but also ensuring better articulation between the community college programs and the four-year institution to which a majority of the students transferred.

One college addressed skill deficiencies by standardizing course requirements in engineering, biology, and English and requiring exit tests of all accounting students. In all transfer English courses at this college, a research paper is also required. Another college, responding to a survey finding that students did not perceive significant growth in their reading ability while at the community college, changed its reading placement system. Other colleges simply require more reading assignments each term to address this problem.

The goal of improving writing skills was evident in several college reports. An associate dean from the local university was invited by one community college to discuss writing difficulties of transfer students at a college-wide forum. Another skill area of concern was computer competence. In addition to requiring a computer course in transfer programs, colleges reported several other ways that they ensure computer competence.

Improving Transfer Services

In addition to the changes cited above, colleges described other ways in which they had addressed problems identified through transfer student assessment. They reported hiring additional personnel in transfer advising/counseling, using transfer data and advice from transfer students obtained during focus groups in the advising process, establishing transfer centers, developing academic advising handbooks, and developing training manuals and sponsoring

training for faculty advisors and adjunct faculty. Some colleges include skills for "coping with transfer" in orientation classes. One college is in the process of preparing a handout of anecdotal comments from transfer student surveys to be made available in the advising and counseling area of the college.

Minority Student Transfer

Colleges were asked for the first time in the 1996 report to discuss issues related to minority student transfer as specified in Section IX of the *State Policy on Transfer*. The *Policy* states that "community colleges should pay particular attention to the performance, retention, and graduation rates of students by race". This proved to be a difficult project for the colleges, partially because they are dependent upon the four-year institutions for accurate and timely data that can be used to examine these issues. A majority of the colleges noted that they would pursue these issues more fully in future reports. Of the colleges that had data to examine, one urban college reported that blacks were under-represented among program completers, especially transfer. Other colleges reported that minority performance at four-year institutions was equivalent to that at the community college; some indicated that minority performance was variable. Another college reported that the percent of minority students accepted at four-year institutions varied from 57% to 71%, as contrasted to at least 71% for other students.

Community colleges have selected transfer assessment as their special topic (SCHEV requirement) and will report again on this topic in 1997. It is anticipated that approximately two-thirds of the colleges will participate in the FIPSE project on the course-based model of transfer success and will report on this project in addition to other transfer studies they have conducted.

REMEDIAL ASSESSMENT RESULTS

In assessing student performance in remedial courses, colleges were requested to discuss the results from special studies they had conducted, such as evaluating their placement and testing procedures, as well as the results they had obtained from tracking students into credit courses, and to program completion. Colleges were encouraged to use the Research and Assessment Data Support System (RADSS) to track students, and they were specifically requested to use this data system to address a special topic: the issues associated with the 1995 high school graduates who enrolled in remedial courses immediately after high school.

Dr. Ann C. Bartholomay, VCCS Faculty-in-Residence for 1996-97, also participated in the evaluation process. She read the remedial sections of the assessment reports and made a presentation to the report evaluators on the 1995 high school students requiring remediation. Working with the VCCS Research Director, she developed data tables on VCCS graduates that had remedial preparation, as well as tables on the 1995 high school students who came directly to community colleges. Dr. Bartholomay's data tables are referenced in the narrative below and

appended to this report. The narrative highlights the improvements that colleges have made to the curriculum and instructional methods, as well as other changes they have made that are intended to improve future remedial student performance and retention.

Success of Remedial Programs

Looking at the success of remedial programs at a majority of the colleges led the report evaluators to two important conclusions. The first was that students who complete remedial courses and enroll in credit courses successfully complete these courses. Fourteen colleges indicated that remedial students who persist obtain grades equal to students who have not had remedial courses. Three colleges observed that remedial students had higher grades in the subsequent credit course than students who had not taken a remedial course. Colleges consistently reported that the real issue for them was not performance in credit courses, but the number of students who did not successfully complete remedial courses. The percent completing courses varied by course and college, with some colleges reporting completion by only 40% of their students in reading and intermediate algebra. Other colleges, however, reported that nearly all of their students completed reading, arithmetic, and algebra courses.

Another measure of success examined by the colleges was the number of VCCS graduates who had enrolled in one or more remedial courses. The attached table "1995 VCCS Community College Graduates Who Enrolled in Developmental Studies", taken from Dr. Bartholomay's report, shows that for the VCCS, thirty-seven percent (37%) of these graduates had taken remedial courses in preparation for credit courses. Individual colleges fell within a range of 26% to 54% of graduates who had remedial preparation. Interestingly, one college reported that the graduation rate for first-time remedial students was higher than for the college's non-remedial students. Another college reported that the graduation rate for English-only remedial students was equal to that of non-remedial students, but that the math-only remedial student rate was lower.

Testing and Placement

Where assessment results concerning student performance do not meet faculty expectations or are not easily explained, colleges often logically turn to a review of testing and placement procedures and policies. During this last biennium several colleges reported either changing their procedures or reviewing the effects of placement changes. Along with such changes, several colleges reported that they had raised the "cut" scores on tests and changed their advising procedures. Colleges often report that when changes are made to "cut" scores, fewer students may be required to enroll in remedial courses, but the pass rates change. Many colleges have either adopted computerized placement tests such as COMPASS or ACCUPLACER, or are considering doing so. One college, however, reported that writing samples were better placement indicators than a computerized test. In an effort to validate the results of changes in its placement tests, one college asked both students and faculty to rate their preparedness for credit courses.

Changes to Courses and Instructional Methods

The most frequent changes that resulted from assessment of remedial instruction involved changes to courses and to instructional methods. The addition of computer-aided instruction was often cited. Colleges reported that they had established reading, writing, and mathematics laboratories and purchased software to assist reading comprehension, for example. One college set up a remedial skills laboratory with both computers and tutors. Another college had purchased tutorial software and a videotape on "math anxiety". Students are asked to view the videotape and write their reactions to it. Several colleges reported that they were in the process of evaluating whether self-paced or structured classes in math were the most effective. Most colleges have not made a final determination on this matter.

Colleges also reported that they had also made changes to course content, such as adding more geometry to a math course, had added new courses to a curriculum, changed course pre-requisites, re-sequenced courses, and changed instructional materials. Concerning instructional techniques, one college added writing to a mathematics course, assuming that improving comprehension and understanding of the underlying assumptions of math would improve performance.

Several colleges reported integrating reading and writing in one course and to using portfolios as an evaluative technique in these courses. One college had students develop writing and reading portfolios during the term, and the instructor provided feedback but did not grade them until the end of the term, when an individual consultation with each student was held. Another college reported that writing portfolios were more reliable indicators of student performance than pre and post tests. Still under review by one college were projects that involved changing the length of writing assignments and collaborative, group writing projects. This same college is also evaluating whether longer reading assignments and keeping written logs of student reactions to reading materials will improve student performance.

Setting Standards

Colleges also took additional steps to improve student performance by setting or revising standards. These measures included developing more uniform standards for evaluating student reading abilities, revising pre-tests and post-tests, requiring a common final exam for all sections of the same mathematics course, and requiring that all remedial English classes teach comprehension as well as study and critical reading skills.

Other Solutions to Improving Performance

Several colleges developed other solutions to the problems they had identified that were associated with student performance in remedial courses. Some colleges added full-time remedial faculty. A developmental studies handbook was developed by one college to be used in

advisement and placement and to standardize course objectives. Another college initiated a professional development initiative for remedial faculty to increase their exposure to instructional methodologies. Focus groups were chosen by one college to get specific feedback from remedial students. The value of these initiatives will have to be determined in future years by the colleges.

VCCS Special Topic

The performance of high school students who enroll immediately after graduation in a community college and need remedial instruction is a topic of interest to the Legislature, the general public, and the VCCS. The assessment report evaluators observed that many of the colleges reported increased numbers of these students enrolling in community college remedial courses in the last two to three years from at least some of the high schools in their service areas. Three colleges noted that recent high school graduates do not make up a significant proportion of their student population. Only two colleges reported having fewer high school students enrolling in remedial instruction.

For the System, of the 1995 high school graduates (n=9,654) enrolling in the VCCS during the 1995-96 academic year, 5,648 (58.5%) were enrolled in remedial courses. The percentage for each college ranged from a low of 34% to a high of 78%.

The highest percentage of these students, (21.5% overall), enrolled in both English and mathematics. Nineteen percent (19%) enrolled in mathematics only; fourteen percent (14%) enrolled only in English. Several colleges noted, in particular, that in their service area, the number of students underprepared in mathematics was increasing. Again, the percentages of students requiring remediation vary by college, and readers are referred to the attached table entitled "1995 High School Graduates Who Enrolled in VCCS Developmental Studies" for college-specific data.

Report evaluators observed that nearly one-half of the colleges reported that the high school students requiring remedial instruction were enrolled in transfer programs. A related observation by colleges was that students enrolled in transfer programs tended to score higher on English placement tests than on mathematics placement tests. Conversely, students in occupational-technical programs scored higher in mathematics than in English.

Several colleges speculated that perhaps students had not taken courses in high school that would prepare them appropriately for college-level work. Others commented that they believed that high schools in their service area tended to emphasize English preparation for transfer students and mathematics for vocational students. Yet another explanation was that high school students do not set goals and prepare for college. Such students have not prepared for college and are likely to move into more general curricular programs -- general studies or liberal arts.

Colleges have responded to the increasing number of high school students who require remediation by developing varied initiatives that result in better communication with high schools in their service area. Colleges generally reported more meetings with high schools and middle schools to exchange data and discuss issues related to student performance. One college, for example, will convene a forum of middle, high school, and college English teachers to discuss issues derived from the remedial student data. This same college has conducted a workshop for middle and high school counselors on readiness for college. Another college has developed a three week, on-campus program for minority eighth grade students, providing a program of pre-collegiate information for them. Other colleges have developed programs to encourage students to enroll in appropriate courses in high school and conducted related workshops for high school counselors. This fall, a workshop is planned by one college for English faculty to share their expectations with high school faculty.

In summary, the 1996 assessment reports provide ample evidence that the colleges have assessment methods in place that are supported by a variety of useful data collection processes. Report evaluators noted that colleges are increasingly turning their attention to data analysis and problem identification. It was apparent also that colleges are beginning to make more idiosyncratic uses of data for specific, targeted solutions to problems concerning student learning, instruction, and program effectiveness.